A Heritage of Smallness by Nick Joaquin

Society for the Filipino is a small rowboat: the barangay. Geography for the Filipino is a small locality: the barrio. History for the Filipino is a small vague saying:*matanda pa kay mahoma; noong* peacetime. Enterprise for the Filipino is a small stall: the *sari-sari*. Industry and production for the Filipino are the small immediate searchings of each day: *isang kahig, isang tuka*. And commerce for the Filipino is the smallest degree of retail: the *tingi*.

What most astonishes foreigners in the Philippines is that this is a country, perhaps the only one in the world, where people buy and sell one stick of cigarette, half a head of garlic, a dab of pomade, part of the contents of a can or bottle, one single egg, one single banana. To foreigners used to buying things by the carton or the dozen or pound and in the large economy sizes, the exquisite transactions of Philippine tingis cannot but seem Lilliputian. So much effort by so many for so little. Like all those children risking neck and limb in the traffic to sell one stick of cigarette at a time. Or those grown-up men hunting the sidewalks all day to sell a puppy or a lantern or a pair of socks. The amount of effort they spend seems out of all proportion to the returns. Such folk are, obviously, not enough. Laboriousness just can never be the equal of labor as skill, labor as audacity, labor as enterprise.

The Filipino who travels abroad gets to thinking that his is the hardest working country in the world. By six or seven in the morning we are already up on our way to work, shops and markets are open; the wheels of industry are already agrind. Abroad, especially in the West, if you go out at seven in the morning you're in a dead-town. Everybody's still in bed; everything's still closed up. Activity doesn't begin till nine or ten– and ceases promptly at five p.m. By six, the business sections are dead towns again. The entire cities go to sleep on weekends. They have a shorter working day, a shorter working week. Yet they pile up more mileage than we who work all day and all week.

Is the disparity to our disparagement?

We work more but make less. Why? Because we act on such a pygmy scale. Abroad they would think you mad if you went in a store and tried to buy just one stick of cigarette. They don't operate on the scale. The difference is greater than between having and not having; the difference is in the way of thinking. They are accustomed to thinking dynamically. We have the habit, whatever our individual resources, of thinking poor, of thinking petty.

Is that the explanation for our continuing failure to rise–that we buy small and sell small, that we think small and do small?

Are we not confusing timidity for humility and making a virtue of what may be the worst of our vices? Is not our timorous clinging to smallness the bondage we must break if we are ever to inherit the earth and be free, independent, progressive? The small must ever be prey to the big. Aldous Huxley said that some people are born victims, or "murderers." He came to the Philippines and thought us the "least original" of people. Is there not a relation between his two terms? Originality requires daring: the daring to destroy the obsolete, to annihilate the petty. It's cold comfort to think we haven't developed that kind of "murderer mentality."

But till we do we had best stop talking about "our heritage of greatness" for the national heritage is– let's face it– a heritage of smallness.

However far we go back in our history it's the small we find–the nipa hut, the barangay, the petty kingship, the slight tillage, the *tingi* trade. All our artifacts are miniatures and so is our folk literature, which is mostly proverbs, or dogmas in miniature. About the one big labor we can point to in our remote past are the rice terraces–and even that grandeur shrinks, on scrutiny, into numberless little separate plots into a series of layers added to previous ones, all this being the accumulation of ages of small routine efforts (like a colony of ant hills) rather than one grand labor following one grand design. We could bring in here the nursery diota about the little drops of water that make the mighty ocean, or the peso that's not a peso if it lacks a centavo; but creative labor, alas, has sterner standards, a stricter hierarchy of values. Many little efforts, however perfect each in itself, still cannot equal one single epic

creation. A galleryful of even the most charming statuettes is bound to look scant beside a Pieta or Moses by Michelangelo; and you could stack up the best short stories you can think of and still not have enough to outweigh a mountain like *War and Peace*.

The depressing fact in Philippine history is what seems to be our native aversion to the large venture, the big risk, the bold extensive enterprise. The pattern may have been set by the migration. We try to equate the odyssey of the migrating barangays with that of the Pilgrim, Father of America, but a glance of the map suffices to show the differences between the two ventures. One was a voyage across an ocean into an unknown world; the other was a going to and from among neighboring islands. One was a blind leap into space; the other seems, in comparison, a mere crossing of rivers. The nature of the one required organization, a sustained effort, special skills, special tools, the building of large ships. The nature of the other is revealed by its vehicle, the barangay, which is a small rowboat, not a seafaring vessel designed for long distances on the avenues of the ocean.

The migrations were thus self-limited, never moved far from their point of origin, and clung to the heart of a small known world; the islands clustered round the Malay Peninsula. The movement into the Philippines, for instance, was from points as next-door geographically as Borneo and Sumatra. Since the Philippines is at heart of this region, the movement was toward center, or, one may say, from near to still nearer, rather than to farther out. Just off the small brief circuit of these migrations was another world: the vast mysterious continent of Australia; but there was significantly no movement towards this terra incognita. It must have seemed too perilous, too unfriendly of climate, too big, too hard. So, Australia was conquered not by the fold next door, but by strangers from across two oceans and the other side of the world. They were more enterprising, they have been rewarded. But history has punished the laggard by setting up over them a White Australia with doors closed to the crowded Malay world.

The barangays that came to the Philippines were small both in scope and size. A barangay with a hundred households would already be enormous; some barangays had only 30 families, or less. These, however, could have been the seed of a great society if there had not been in that a fatal aversion to synthesis. The barangay settlements already displayed a Philippine characteristic: the tendency to petrify in isolation instead of consolidating, or to split smaller instead of growing. That within the small area of Manila Bay there should be three different kingdoms (Tondo, Manila and Pasay) may mean that the area wa originally settled by three different barangays that remained distinct, never came together, never fused; or it could mean that a single original settlement; as it grew split into three smaller pieces.

Philippine society, as though fearing bigness, ever tends to revert the condition of the barangay of the small enclosed society. We don't grow like a seed, we split like an amoeba. The moment a town grows big it become two towns. The moment a province becomes populous it disintegrates into two or three smaller provinces. The excuse offered for divisions i always the alleged difficulty of administering so huge an entity. But Philippines provinces are microscopic compared to an American state like, say, Texas, where the local government isn't heard complaining it can't efficiently handle so vast an area. We, on the other hand, make a confession of character whenever we split up a town or province to avoid having of cope, admitting that, on that scale, we can't be efficient; we are capable only of the small. The decentralization and barrio-autonomy movement expresses our craving to return to the one unit of society we feel adequate to: the barangay, with its 30 to a hundred families. Anything larger intimidates. We would deliberately limit ourselves to the small performance. This attitude, an immemorial one, explains why we're finding it so hard to become a nation, and why our pagan forefathers could not even imagine the task. Not E pluribus, unum is the impulse in our culture but Out of many, fragments. Foreigners had to come and unite our land for us; the labor was far beyond our powers. Great was the King of Sugbu, but he couldn't even control the tiny isle across his bay. Federation is still not even an idea for the tribes of the North; and the Moro sultanates behave like our political parties: they keep splitting off into particles.

Because we cannot unite for the large effort, even the small effort is increasingly beyond us. There is less to learn in our schools, but even this little is protested by our young as too hard. The falling line on the graph of effort is, alas, a recurring pattern in our history. Our artifacts but repeat a refrain of decline and fall, which wouldn't be so sad if there had been a summit decline from, but the evidence is that we

start small and end small without ever having scaled any peaks. Used only to the small effort, we are not, as a result, capable of the sustained effort and lose momentum fast. We have a term for it: *ningas cogon*.

Go to any exhibit of Philippine artifacts and the items that from our "cultural heritage" but confirm three theories about us, which should be stated again.

First: that the Filipino works best on small scale–tiny figurines, small pots, filigree work in gold or silver, decorative arabesques. The deduction here is that we feel adequate to the challenge of the small, but are cowed by the challenge of the big.

Second: that the Filipino chooses to work in soft easy materials–clay, molten metal, tree searching has failed to turn up anything really monumental in hardstone. Even carabao horn, an obvious material for native craftsmen, has not been used to any extent remotely comparable to the use of ivory in the ivory countries. The deduction here is that we feel equal to the materials that yield but evade the challenge of materials that resist.

Third: that having mastered a material, craft or product, we tend to rut in it and don't move on to a next phase, a larger development, based on what we have learned. In fact, we instantly lay down even what mastery we already posses when confronted by a challenge from outside of something more masterly, instead of being provoked to develop by the threat of competition. Faced by the challenge of Chinese porcelain, the native art of pottery simply declined, though porcelain should have been the next phase for our pottery makers. There was apparently no effort to steal and master the arts of the Chinese. The excuse offered here that we did not have the materials for the techniques for the making of porcelain–unites in glum brotherhood yesterday's pottery makers and today's would be industrialists. The native pot got buried by Chinese porcelain as Philippine tobacco is still being buried by the blue seal.

Our cultural history, rather than a cumulative development, seems mostly a series of dead ends. One reason is a fear of moving on to a more complex phase; another reason is a fear of tools. Native pottery, for instance, somehow never got far enough to grasp the principle of the wheel. Neither did native agriculture ever reach the point of discovering the plow for itself, or even the idea of the draft animal, though the carabao was handy. Wheel and plow had to come from outside because we always stopped short of technology, This stoppage at a certain level is the recurring fate of our arts and crafts.

The santo everybody's collecting now are charming as legacies, depressing as indices, for the art of the santero was a small art, in a not very demanding medium: wood. Having achieved perfection in it, the santero was faced by the challenge of proving he could achieve equal perfection on a larger scale and in more difficult materials: hardstone, marble, bronze. The challenge was not met. Like the pagan potter before him, the santero stuck to his tiny rut, repeating his little perfections over and over. The iron law of life is: Develop or decay. The art of the santero did not advance; so it declined. Instead of moving onto a harder material, it retreated to a material even easier than wool: Plaster–and plaster has wrought the death of relax art.

One could go on and on with this litany.

Philippine movies started 50 years ago and, during the '30s, reached a certain level of proficiency, where it stopped and has rutted ever since looking more and more primitive as the rest of the cinema world speeds by on the way to new frontiers. We have to be realistic, say local movie producers we're in this business not to make art but money. But even from the business viewpoint, they're not "realistic" at all. The true businessman ever seeks to increase his market and therefore ever tries to improve his product. Business dies when it resigns itself, as local movies have done, to a limited market.

After more than half a century of writing in English, Philippine Literature in that medium is still identified with the short story. That small literary form is apparently as much as we feel equal to. But by limiting ourselves less and less capable even of the small thing–as the fate of the pagan potter and the Christian santero should have warned us. It' no longer as obvious today that the Filipino writer has

mastered the short story form.

It's two decades since the war but what were mere makeshift in postwar days have petrified into institutions like the jeepney, which we all know to be uncomfortable and inadequate, yet cannot get rid of, because the would mean to tackle the problem of modernizing our systems of transportation–a problem we think so huge we hide from it in the comforting smallness of the jeepney. A small solution to a huge problem–do we deceive ourselves into thinking that possible? The jeepney hints that we do, for the jeepney carrier is about as adequate as a spoon to empty a river with.

With the population welling, and land values rising, there should be in our cities, an upward thrust in architecture, but we continue to build small, in our timid two-story fashion. Oh, we have excuses. The land is soft: earthquakes are frequent. But Mexico City, for instance, is on far swampier land and Mexico City is not a two-story town. San Francisco and Tokyo are in worse earthquake belts, but San Francisco and Tokyo reach up for the skies. Isn't our architecture another expression of our smallness spirit? To build big would pose problems too big for us. The water pressure, for example, would have to be improved–and it's hard enough to get water on the ground floor flat and frail, our cities indicate our disinclination to make any but the smallest effort possible.

It wouldn't be so bad if our aversion for bigness and our clinging to the small denoted a preference for quality over bulk; but the little things we take forever to do too often turn out to be worse than the mass-produced article. Our couturiers, for instance, grow even limper of wrist when, after waiting months and months for a pin ~a weaver to produce a yard or two of the fabric, they find they have to discard most of the stuff because it's so sloppily done. Foreigners who think of pushing Philippine fabric in the world market give up in despair after experiencing our inability to deliver in quantity. Our proud apologia is that mass production would ruin the "quality" of our products. But Philippine crafts might be roused from the doldrums if forced to come up to mass-production standards.

It's easy enough to quote the West against itself, to cite all those Western artists and writers who rail against the cult of bigness and mass production and the "bitch goddess success"; but the arguments against technological progress, like the arguments against nationalism, are possible only to those who have already gone through that stage so successfully they can now afford to revile it. The rest of us can only crave to be big enough to be able to deplore bigness.

For the present all we seen to be able to do is ignore pagan evidence and blame our inability to sustain the big effort of our colonizers: they crushed our will and spirit, our initiative and originality. But colonialism is not uniquely our ordeal but rather a universal experience. Other nations went under the heel of the conqueror but have not spent the rest of their lives whining. What people were more trod under than the Jews? But each have been a thoroughly crushed nation get up and conquered new worlds instead. The Norman conquest of England was followed by a subjugation very similar to our experience, but what issued from that subjugation were the will to empire and the verve of a new language.

If it be true that we were enervated by the loss of our primordial freedom, culture and institutions, then the native tribes that were never under Spain and didn't lose what we did should be showing a stronger will and spirit, more initiative and originality, a richer culture and greater progress, than the Christian Filipino. Do they? And this favorite apologia of ours gets further blasted when we consider a people who, alongside us, suffered a far greater trampling yet never lost their enterprising spirit. On the contrary, despite centuries of ghettos and programs and repressive measures and racial scorn, the Chinese in the Philippines clambered to the top of economic heap and are still right up there when it comes to the big deal. Shouldn't they have long come to the conclusion (as we say we did) that there's no point in hustling and laboring and amassing wealth only to see it wrested away and oneself punished for rising?

An honest reading of our history should rather force us to admit that it was the colonial years that pushed us toward the larger effort. There was actually an advance in freedom, for the unification of the land, the organization of towns and provinces, and the influx of new ideas, started our liberation from the rule of the petty, whether of clan, locality or custom. Are we not vexed at the hinterlander still

bound by primordial terrors and taboos? Do we not say we have to set him “free” through education? Freedom, after all is more than a political condition; and the colonial lowlander–especially a person like, say, Rizal–was surely more of a freeman than the unconquered tribesman up in the hills. As wheel and plow set us free from a bondage to nature, so town and province liberated us from the bounds of the barangay.

The liberation can be seen just by comparing our pagan with our Christian statuary. What was static and stolid in the one becomes, in the other, dynamic motion and expression. It can be read in the rear of architecture. Now, at last, the Filipino attempts the massive–the stone bridge that unites, the irrigation dam that gives increase, the adobe church that identified. If we have a “heritage of greatness it’s in these labors and in three epic acts of the colonial period; first, the defense of the land during two centuries of siege; second, the Propaganda Movement; and the third, the Revolution.

The first, a heroic age that profoundly shaped us, began 1600 with the 50-year war with the Dutch and may be said to have drawn to a close with the British invasion of 1762. The War with the Dutch is the most under-rated event in our history, for it was the Great War in our history. It had to be pointed out that the Philippines, a small colony practically abandoned to itself, yet held at bay for half a century the mightiest naval power in the world at the time, though the Dutch sent armada after armada, year after year, to conquer the colony, or by cutting off the galleons that were its links with America, starve the colony to its knees. We rose so gloriously to the challenge the impetus of spirit sent us spilling down to Borneo and the Moluccas and Indo-China, and it seemed for a moment we might create an empire. But the tremendous effort did create an elite vital to our history: the Creole-Tagalog-Pampango principalia - and ruled it together during these centuries of siege, and which would which was the nation in embryo, which defended the land climax its military career with the war of resistance against the British in the 1660’s. By then, this elite already deeply felt itself a nation that the government it set up in Bacolor actually defined the captive government in Manila as illegitimate. From her flows the heritage that would flower in Malolos, for centuries of heroic effort had bred, in Tagalog and the Pampango, a habit of leadership, a lordliness of spirit. They had proved themselves capable of the great and sustained enterprise, destiny was theirs. An analyst of our history notes that the sun on our flag has eight rays, each of which stands for a Tagalog or Pampango province, and the the Tagalogs and Pampangos at Biak-na-Bato "assumed the representation of the entire country and, therefore, became in fact the Philippines.

From the field of battle this elite would, after the British war, shift to the field of politics, a significant move; and the Propaganda, which began as a Creole campaign against the Peninsulars, would turn into the nationalist movement of Rizal and Del Pilar. This second epic act in our history seemed a further annulment of the timidity. A man like Rizal was a deliberate rebel against the cult of the small; he was so various a magus because he was set on proving that the Filipino could tackle the big thing, the complex job. His novels have epic intentions; his poems sustain the long line and go against Garcia Villa’s more characteristically Philippine dictum that poetry is the small intense line.

With the Revolution, our culture is in dichotomy. This epic of 1896 is indeed a great effort–but by a small minority. The Tagalog and Pampango had taken it upon themselves to protest the grievances of the entire archipelago. Moreover, within the movement was a clash between the two strains in our culture–between the propensity for the small activity and the will to something more ambitious. Bonifacio’s Katipunan was large in number but small in scope; it was a rattling of bolos; and its post fiasco efforts are little more than amok raids in the manner the Filipino is said to excel in. (An observation about us in the last war was that we fight best not as an army, but in small informal guerrilla outfits; not in pitched battle, but in rapid hit-and-run raids.) On the other hand, there was, in Cavite, an army with officers, engineers, trenches, plans of battle and a complex organization - a Revolution unlike all the little uprisings or mere raids of the past because it had risen above tribe and saw itself as the national destiny. This was the highest we have reached in nationalistic effort. But here again, having reached a certain level of achievement, we stopped. The Revolution is, as we say today, "unfinished."

The trend since the turn of the century, and especially since the war, seems to be back to the tradition of timidity, the heritage of smallness. We seem to be making less and less effort, thinking ever smaller,

doing even smaller. The air droops with a feeling of inadequacy. We can't cope; we don't respond; we are not rising to challenges. So tiny a land as ours shouldn't be too hard to connect with transportation - but we get crushed on small jeepneys, get killed on small trains, get drowned in small boats. Larger and more populous cities abroad find it no problem to keep themselves clean - but the simple matter of garbage can create a "crisis" in the small city of Manila. One American remarked that, after seeing Manila's chaos of traffic, he began to appreciate how his city of Los Angeles handles its far, far greater volume of traffic. Is building a road that won't break down when it rains no longer within our powers? Is even the building of sidewalks too herculean of task for us?

One writer, as he surveyed the landscape of shortages—no rice, no water, no garbage collectors, no peace, no order—gloomily mumbled that disintegration seems to be creeping upon us and groped for Yeat's terrifying lines:

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold:

Mere anarchy is loosed…

Have our capacities been so diminished by the small efforts we are becoming incapable even to the small things? Our present problems are surely not what might be called colossal or insurmountable–yet we stand helpless before them. As the population swells, those problems will expand and multiply. If they daunt us now, will they crush us then? The prospect is terrifying.

On the Feast of Freedom we may do well to ponder the Parable of the Servants and the Talents. The enterprising servants who increase talents entrusted to them were rewarded by their Lord; but the timid servant who made no effort to double the one talent given to him was deprived of that talent and cast into the outer darkness, where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth:

"For to him who has, more shall be given; but from him who has not, even the little he has shall be taken away."